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‘Spokesperson for everyone at the Laboratory who believed in Oppenheimer’

Los Alamos physicist Fred Ribe’s 1954 petition protested former Lab Director’s revoked clearance

By Mia Jaeggli, archivist, [National Security Research Center](#)

In 1953, **J. Robert Oppenheimer** received an ultimatum.

The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) sent the "father of the atomic bomb" and former Los Alamos Director a letter outlining two options: give up his Q clearance and role as advisor or appear before a board to prove that he wasn’t a threat to national security.

Oppenheimer chose the latter.

The ensuing saga that unfolded throughout 1954 peaked with a four-week, closed-door hearing in April and May after which Oppenheimer’s security clearance was formally revoked. The long, complex affair consisted of national security concerns, a tangle of questionable charges, divided opinions, loyalties, egos, and vendettas.

AEC Chairman **Lewis L. Strauss** and Oppenheimer were at the center of events, though an important part of the historical record is **Fred L. Ribe** and the 493 other Los Alamos scientists who risked harming their careers to protest Oppenheimer’s ordeal. Ribe wrote a one-page letter, signed by his colleagues, to President **Dwight Eisenhower** and the AEC commissioners “objecting the decision and the grounds for it” as Ribe later wrote.

This petition – and Strauss’s written response – were donated by Ribe and are part of the unclassified historical collections in the National Security Research Center, which is the Lab’s classified library.

June 7, 1954.

We the undersigned scientific personnel of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory are deeply disturbed by the recommendations of the A. E. C. special security board concerning the fitness of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer to continue in government service.

The board has found Dr. Oppenheimer to be a loyal and discreet citizen who has made unusual contributions to the security of our country. The nature of the argument by which the majority of the board nevertheless concludes that he is a security risk is alarming. For example, the new requirement of enthusiastic conformity has no place in an American personnel security system. We feel that a man can give no better proof of his devotion to the security of our country than has Dr. Oppenheimer by his record over the past twelve years.

We agree that it is the prerogative of government to choose its own advisors but it is inexcusable to employ the personnel security system merely as a means of dispensing with the services of a loyal but unwanted consultant.

As scientists engaged in the national defense effort we are apprehensive that this poorly founded decision in regard to Dr. Oppenheimer will make it increasingly difficult to obtain adequate scientific talent in our defense laboratories.

1. Fred L. Ribe 3. John W. Jordan 60 David J. Gidycz
21 Louis Rosen 34 Malcolm Wallis 46 Leo P. Grant
22 Glenn M. Frye Jr. 35 R. F. Vaschek 45 Ralph Nobles
23 George A. Sawyer 36 Nelson J. Jamie
24 Jim Wahl 37 Morris E. Battat
25 James H. Coon 38 Elizabeth R. Granes
26 Robert C. Allen 39 Alice H. Armstrong
27 Sam J. Bame Jr. 40 C. Wilkin Johnstone
28 George Quirkhart 41 Alan S. Rawcliffe
29 Dale M. Hahn 42 William L. Brown
30 W. S. Deland 43 C. Scott Johnson
31 James Terrell 44 Maurice Janco
32 Harold V. Argo 45 Les Alberts Spec.
61 W. R. Jones

caption: Los Alamos physicist Fred Ribe collected nearly 500 signatures from Lab staff in 1954, shortly after former first Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer's security clearance was revoked following accusations of his loyalty, among other issues.

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Oppenheimer and the H-bomb

During World War II, theoretical physicist Oppenheimer led the Manhattan Project's clandestine lab in Los Alamos from 1943 to 1945. In just 27 months, Oppenheimer and his team secretly created the first nuclear weapons, a scientific achievement that brought the world into the Atomic Age and helped end history's bloodiest conflict.

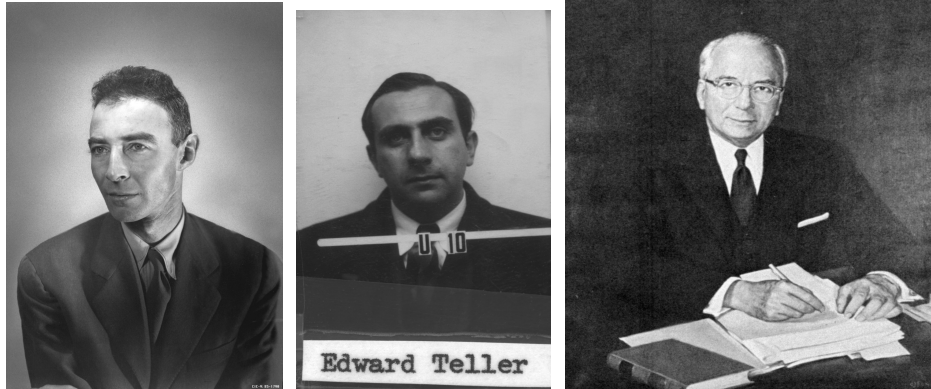
Post-World War II, Oppenheimer left the Lab and soon became the director of the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton and the chairman of the AEC's General Atomic Commission (GAC). (The AEC was the precursor to today's Department of Energy.) Through his work on GAC from 1947 to 1953, Oppenheimer was the leading national scientific advisor on the future of nuclear weapons development.

Oppenheimer was initially wary of the moral implications and scientific feasibility in pursuing the development of the hydrogen bomb and voted in 1949 with GAC that an accelerated thermonuclear weapons (H-bomb) research and production program wasn't advisable. Oppenheimer didn't oppose H-bomb research, but "hoped that [it] would 'never be produced'," according to the Oppenheimer biography *American Prometheus*.

Oppenheimer's stance rankled President **Harry S. Truman** and Strauss. Both feared the Soviet Union would build the H-bomb before the U.S. and pushed for the program.

NSRC Historian **Alan Carr** said that at the time, "People thought of the H-bomb as a weapon with the massive destructive ability to take out a whole city. But thermonuclear weapons are far more flexible than they understood back then."

Thus, lines were drawn in the science community. Yet after Truman ordered its development in January 1950 and physicists **Edward Teller** and **Stanislaw Ulam**, both of whom Oppenheimer worked with at Los Alamos, proved that the H-Bomb was possible in January 1951, Oppenheimer remained divided. According to then-Lab director **Norris E. Bradbury**'s testimony, Oppenheimer didn't hinder the program, nor did he advocate or recruit for it.



From left, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Edward Teller and Lewis Strauss all suffered personal and professional consequences following the revocation of Oppenheimer's security clearance in 1954.

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However, Truman and Strauss continued to believe that Oppenheimer was “persuading ... outstanding scientists not to work on the hydrogen-bomb” and therefore actively obstructing the program, according to *American Prometheus*. Unfortunately, the GAC report and sour professional relationships became the impetus for the ordeal that followed.

Strauss vs. Oppenheimer

Before there was a whisper of revoking Oppenheimer's clearance, his relationship with Strauss stacked the outcome against him. Popular historical narrative argues that Strauss had a personal vendetta and intended to destroy Oppenheimer's credibility and career.

The most significant rift between the two men was the H-bomb, but disagreement turned to animosity during a June 1949 AEC Joint Committee Session concerning radioactive isotopes. While this happened many months before Truman's H-bomb order, Oppenheimer's statements in his testimony set the stage for Strauss's later actions.

Strauss believed that radioactive isotopes had military value and argued against exporting them. However, with little patience for those he considered intellectually inferior, Oppenheimer publicly humiliated Strauss by saying, "My own rating of the importance of isotopes...is that they are far less important than electronic devices, but far more important than, let us say, vitamins."

In response, Strauss didn't hide his look of hatred. Oppenheimer had publicly revealed that Strauss knew little about physics, particularly nuclear science.

"Somewhere along the way, [Oppenheimer] had learned to go for the jugular," said AEC General Counsel Joseph Volpe in *The Ruin of J. Robert Oppenheimer*.

Accusations and charges

On December 23, 1953, Oppenheimer was notified that his clearance had been revoked. He had the option of resigning or appearing before the AEC personnel security board to argue his case. Strauss gave him one evening to respond.

The next day, Oppenheimer wrote, "[Resigning] would mean that I accept and concur in the view that I am not fit to serve this government that I have now served for some twelve years. This I cannot do."

The numerous charges outlined in the eight-page document concerned his "character, associations and loyalty." Most of the letter outlined his associations with communist sympathizers and most damning, his lies during FBI interrogations to protect a friend. The most alarming accusation, at least for the science community, was the last charge that Oppenheimer willfully obstructed the H-bomb development.

Testimonies: loyalties and betrayals

A three-man board would decide Oppenheimer's fate though the hearing was unarguably not fair. The board had access to a 3,000 page FBI file on Oppenheimer and bugs provided by Strauss, while the prosecution's witnesses were kept secret – all hampering defense efforts.

Of the 40 witnesses called to testify, 28 were fiercely loyal to Oppenheimer and highly respected, including Nobel prize winners **Isidor Rabi** and [Enrico Fermi](#), both of whom worked with him at the wartime Los Alamos Lab.

Rabi refused to be baited into criticizing Oppenheimer's character or misgivings about the H-bomb. Rabi famously said, "We have an A-bomb ... what more do you want, mermaids? This is just a tremendous achievement. If the end of that road is this kind of hearing, which can't help but be humiliating, I thought it was a pretty bad show. I still think so."

Despite the overwhelming support for Oppenheimer, two testimonies held more weight than all the others combined: that of Manhattan Project Leader General **Leslie R. Groves** and Teller's.

Groves was the first witness to testify on behalf of Oppenheimer. He defended his selection of Oppenheimer as director of the wartime Los Alamos Lab and noted Oppenheimer's achievements despite FBI suspicions. However, during the prosecution's cross-examination, Groves was asked, considering the AEC's 1954 security requirements, if granting a clearance to Oppenheimer would "endanger" national security based on Oppenheimer's past associations.

Groves stated, "I don't care how important the man is...I would not clear Dr. Oppenheimer today if I were a member of the Commission on the basis of this interpretation." Groves went on to say that if the requirements were different, he'd have a different opinion. Groves was "waffling," but, according to *American Prometheus*, Strauss had threatened to accuse him of covering up Oppenheimer's lies.

Teller began with a glowing testimony of Oppenheimer's work and loyalty to the United States. However, none of that mattered when he said, "If it is a question of wisdom and judgment, as demonstrated by actions since 1945 [when World War II ended following the release of the atomic bombs], then I would say one would be wiser not to grant clearance." By "actions" Teller referred to Oppenheimer's "bad advice" and lack of support for Teller's H-bomb, according to *The Ruin of J. Robert Oppenheimer*.

The science community regarded the testimony as a betrayal and many former colleagues shunned Teller. "The hatred at the Lab was so thick, you could cut it with a knife," recalled retired LANL Associate Director John Hopkins, who was working at Lab then.

Two-to-one verdict

After reviewing the secret FBI report and the 3,300-page hearing transcript, the board made its recommendation on May 27. "The chemist scornfully said no; the businessman and university president ... said yes," according to an article in *Time* magazine. Oppenheimer's clearance was formally revoked on June 29, 1954, the day before it would have expired.

The board's final statements emphasized Oppenheimer's loyalty and his "unusual ability... to keep vital secrets," but protested his lack of "enthusiastic support" for the H-bomb program, his lies to the FBI to protect a friend, and his alleged vulnerability to coercion by previously known communist members or sympathizers, including his brother Frank Oppenheimer.

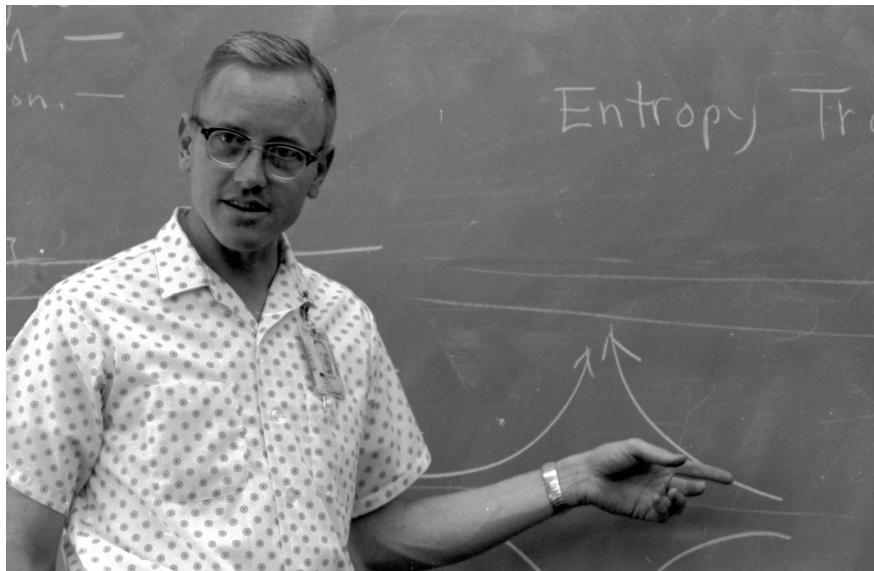
Strauss is still considered the motivating force behind the revocation of Oppenheimer's clearance. Before and during the hearing, Strauss ordered illegal wiretaps of Oppenheimer's phones and had him followed by undercover agents, according to *American Prometheus*. Furthermore, Strauss allegedly bribed AEC commissioners, including Henry DeWolf Smyth, who was the lone dissenter on the board, according to *The Ruin of J. Robert Oppenheimer*.

Outrage and a petition

"All scientists," according to *American Prometheus*, "were now on notice that there could be serious consequences for those who challenged state policies."

In Los Alamos, the events felt personal. According to Lab Historian **Roger Meade**, "For the junior scientists, Oppenheimer's treatment caused a visceral reaction, and they felt that the Oppenheimer incident was an attack on science, not just [the man]. The sentiment of the scientists was, 'We're here to do science...and now they're attacking [the man] that led us here.'"

On June 7, 1954, junior physicist Fred L. Ribe wrote a letter and petition, subsequently sent by telegram to Eisenhower and the AEC.



caption: Physicist Fred Ribe came to the Lab in 1951. It's unclear if he ever knew former Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer personally, but was compelled to organize a petition in 1954 against Oppenheimer's revoked security clearance.

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"The nature of the argument by which the majority of the board nevertheless concludes that he is a security risk is alarming," Ribe wrote. "...we are apprehensive that this poorly founded decision...will make it increasingly difficult to obtain adequate scientific talent in our defense laboratories."

Ribe sent copies of the petition to nearly 3,000 mail stops around the Lab. He gathered 282 signatures within a day; more than 80 percent of the Theoretical Division signed it, according to a June 9, 1954 *Albuquerque Journal* article. Soon, 493 scientists had added their names, including future Lab Director **Harold M. Agnew**, who worked with Oppenheimer at the wartime Los Alamos Lab.

Ribe was three years out of his Ph.D. physics program at the University of Chicago and joined the Lab in 1951. He knew he could be punished by spearheading a mass protestation of Oppenheimer's treatment.

Meade, who was Ribe's colleague, described him as "an extraordinarily nice guy. Earnest but very serious. [Fred] wanted to be sure that we were always doing the right thing."

"Fred was the spokesperson for everyone at the Laboratory who believed in Oppenheimer," Meade said.

The petition was given to the board members at Oppenheimer's hearing. It's not known what Oppenheimer's reaction to the petition was.

Operation "Butter-up"

After Oppenheimer lost his clearance, Strauss penned a letter to Ribe and the Lab at large.

"The Atomic Energy Commission does not believe that any government servant – scientist or engineer or administrator should slant his advice or temper his professional opinion because of apprehension that such advice or opinion might be unpopular now or in the future. We certainly do not want 'yes men' in the employ of the Atomic Energy Commission," Strauss wrote.

Strauss's attempt to offer assurances failed. A July 16, 1954 article from an unknown New Mexican newspaper stated, "The AEC prosecutor's constant effort to attribute evil motives to Dr. Oppenheimer's [controversial opinions], have inevitably made the scientists think that Strauss's letter to Los Alamos is 'less than candid.'"

Strauss tried again, this time with a visit to the Lab. During "Operation Butter-Up," as it was referred to in *The New Mexican* newspaper, scientists angrily told Strauss that the hearing had created a "very grave morale problem."

However, according to Meade and Carr, local anecdotes suggest that Strauss met the scientists' outrage with flattery and charm, though his approach likely didn't assuage sentiments of betrayal and anger.

The Outcome

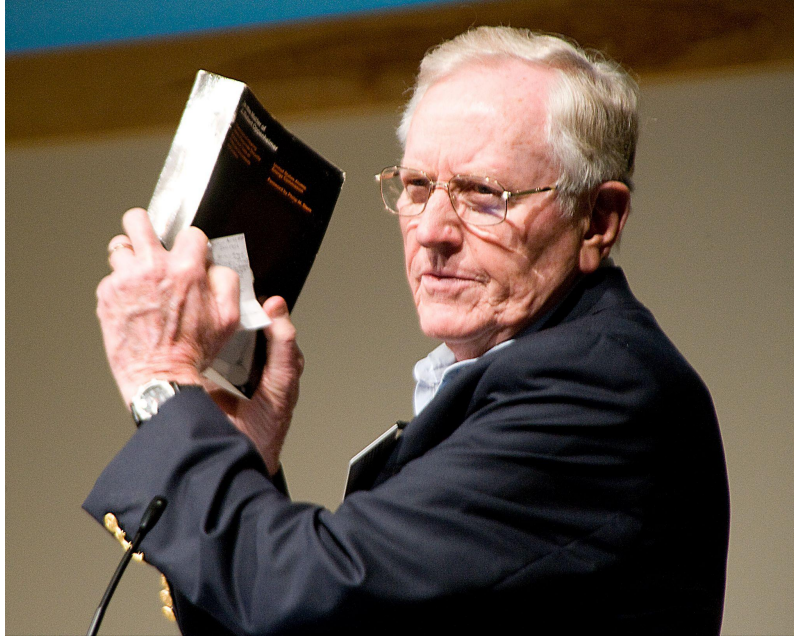
Strauss

In the end, Strauss's reputation was tarnished. The Senate denied his appointment to Secretary of Commerce in 1959. The rejection was the end to Strauss's 42-year political career. Largely retired, he published his memoir and lived on a cattle-breeding farm until his death in 1974.

Ribe

Meanwhile, Ribe rose to Group and later Division Leader for the Lab's Controlled Thermonuclear Research Division. In 1977, he became the Professor of Nuclear Engineering at the University of Washington.

Ribe returned to LANL in 2008 to deliver a presentation on the AEC Security Hearings and the petition. By the time he died in June 2019, he'd written over 70 papers, garnered numerous awards and was considered "a leading pioneer in U.S. fusion research," according to his obituary, which also mentioned his 1954 petition drive.



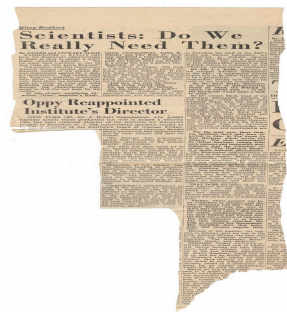
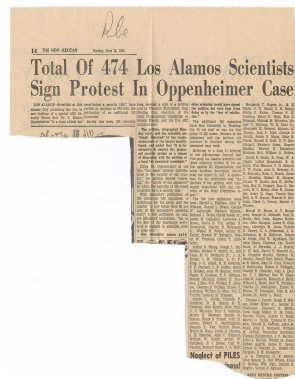
caption: Physicist Fred Ribe holds the transcripts from J. Robert Oppenheimer's 1954 security hearing during Ribe's 2008 presentation on the hearings and his petition at Los Alamos.

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Oppenheimer

Oppenheimer's political career ended abruptly and in response to the AEC verdict, he said, "Our country is fortunate in its scientists, in their high skill, and their devotion. I know that they will work faithfully to preserve and strengthen this country."

Those who knew him said Oppenheimer was never the same following the hearing. In time, he retreated from public life. He died from throat cancer on February 18, 1967. More than 600 family, friends and colleagues attended his memorial service.



caption: Physicist Fred Ribe's petition and related newspaper clippings are part of the unclassified historical collections in the Lab's National Security Research Center.

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